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# WATERGATE REVISITED

Did the press — and the courts — really get to the bottom of history's most famous burglary?

by PHIL STANFORD

When Jim Hougan's new Watergate book, *Secret Agenda*, was published last winter, it caused a brief but intense flurry of interest. Writing for *The New York Times Book Review*, Pulitzer Prize-winner J. Anthony Lukas faulted Hougan in several instances for jumping to what he considered unwarranted conclusions, particularly when it came to Hougan's theory that the real reason behind the Watergate burglary was a secret sex scandal. However, he also found that Hougan had presented some "valuable new evidence." "If even half of this is true," wrote Lukas — whose word carries particular weight in this instance because his own book on Watergate, *Nightmare*, is considered the definitive work on the subject — "*Secret Agenda* will add an important new dimension to our understanding of Watergate."

"But," Lukas added, "it may be months before reporters can sort through this material, check Mr. Hougan's sources, and decide which of these revelations is solid gold, which dross."

Reviewing the book for *The Washington Post Book World*, Anthony Marro, himself an old Watergate hand and now managing editor of *Newsday*, criticized Hougan for mixing "diligent information gathering with questionable, even reckless, assumptions about motive and purpose." Nevertheless, he wrote, "Hougan has attacked the official record of Watergate with . . . considerable skill, pointing up scores of questions, flaws, contradictions, and holes."

"It likely will take some time for Hougan's reporting to be absorbed, cross-checked, challenged, and tested," Marro added, "and whether this proves to be an important book or simply a controversial one will depend on how well it survives the scrutiny that it is sure to receive."

Another review, by Robert Sherrill,

appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times*. Sherrill, who has a reputation for being a hard-nosed investigative writer, found that Hougan "builds a compelling case even though some crucial parts, as he readily concedes, are based on circumstantial evidence." "If nothing else," Sherrill concluded, "*Secret Agenda* has raised enough questions to remind the press that no matter how conscientiously it tries to unravel scandalous riddles of government, it should wait a few years before boasting that the solution is complete" — and, like Lukas and Marro, he left no doubt that he expected the press to get to work.

That, of course, was more than a year ago — and to date, apparently, no one from any of the major news organizations has made an effort to test any of Hougan's findings. This seems odd, if only because the Watergate affair is one of the most important political and journalistic events of our time, and because, if Hougan is right, our knowledge of it is seriously flawed.

What Hougan presents in *Secret Agenda* is not so much a totally new version of Watergate as it is, to use Marro's words, "a significant new dimension and perspective." There is nothing in his account to suggest that Richard Nixon was not guilty of impeachable offenses. Nor does Hougan dispute that the break-in was planned in the White House, or that when the burglars were caught, the president and his men conspired to cover up their involvement. What he does say is that all the while this was going on, the CIA, quite without the knowledge of the White House, was pursuing an agenda of its own. Hougan says that at least two of those involved in the break-in were actually spying on the White House for the CIA and conducting their own illegal domestic operations; that one of these domestic operations involved spying on the clients of a call-girl ring operating out of an apartment complex near the Watergate;

and that when the White House-planned bugging of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters threatened to expose this operation — as it might have, since some of the clients for the call girls were being referred from the DNC — it was sabotaged in order to protect the CIA's role. "Watergate," Hougan writes, "was not so much a partisan political scandal as it was . . . a sex scandal, the unpredictable outcome of a CIA operation that, in the simplest of terms, tripped on its own shoelaces."

Now, this is clearly a mind-boggling scenario, and there is a natural tendency for some to simply laugh it off. However, considering the published statements of journalists such as Lukas, Marro, and Sherrill, as well as Hougan's own reputation as a serious writer and investigator — he is a former Washington editor of *Harper's* magazine and the author of *Spooks*, a well-documented study of the use of intelligence agents by corporations and other private entities — Hougan's findings cannot be so easily dismissed. What's needed is a careful look at his facts: either they are correct or they aren't. And the logical place for such an investigation to begin is with Hougan's account of the break-in, since that is the keystone of his entire argument. My own inquiries indicate that Hougan is right on several crucial points.

**A**ccording to the generally accepted account of the break-in, the reason the Watergate burglars entered the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, was to replace a defective bug on the telephone of the secretary of DNC chairman Larry O'Brien. As this version goes, in the course of a break-in two weeks earlier, James McCord had installed two bugs — one on the phone belonging to O'Brien's secretary, the other on the phone of another official, R. Spencer

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